

UVA-IFMC Champions Refugee Mental Health

By Eva P. Stitt, Refugee Mental Health Analyst

The Charlottesville Refugee Mental Health Referral System, a local partnership of International Rescue Committee (IRC), Charlottesville/Albemarle Health Department, and University of Virginia International Family Medicine Clinic (UVA-IFMC) aims to address risk factors and treat mental health conditions that adversely affect refugee's life, adaptation, and self-sufficiency in America. Developed in January 2014 through the Virginia Refugee Mental Health Initiative (now Virginia Refugee Healing Partnership), the mental health screening process starts at the Charlottesville/Albemarle Health Department and the results are forwarded to UVA-IFMC. The mental health referral system did not need to take extra steps to get established because there's already a strong existing relationship between both the Health Department and IRC and UVA-IFMC. "Refugees in Charlottesville are fortunate to be able to receive health care in a culturally sensitive environment with practitioners who are aware of their special needs and comfortable working with patients who require language interpretation as a condition of service", said Harriet Kuhr, Executive Director of the International Rescue Committee in Charlottesville, a refugee resettlement agency.

The UVA-IFMC offers full medical services centered on patients' health and emotional needs. The mental health services are coordinated with the department's Family Stress Clinic, which provides family and individual counseling services. Psychiatric services are coordinated and provided by Dr. Richard Merkel, who supervises senior residents from the UVA Department of Psychiatry. It's a one-stop shop that makes it easy for refugees to seek or receive care. Dr. Fern Hauck, Director of the UVA-IFMC explains: "We provide primary care to multi-generational refugee families in a setting that truly becomes their medical home. Our providers are trained in refugee health conditions and work closely with the IRC and Health Department to provide comprehensive care. We refer patients to specialists throughout UVA and help them navigate their way through the health system. We have a dedicated social worker and nurse care coordinator who provide additional services that make a huge impact on the care we provide, for example, having patients return with their medications to make sure they are taking them properly, arranging for transportation to clinic visits, and helping secure insurance coverage, to name just a few. We are very fortunate that UVA contracts for phone interpreter services 24/7 and during working hours we have access to live interpreters. In Family Medicine, we have instituted a comprehensive cultural competence and refugee health education curriculum for our residents and students, including monthly seminars called "International Rounds," resident workshops, and faculty and staff development workshops, to name just a few. We offer a refugee healthcare elective for medical students which are oversubscribed. It is very exciting to see the interest among our learners in caring for patients from different cultures and they all become quite proficient. I feel very fortunate to be able to care for this population of patients and to collaborate with the Health Department, IRC, mental health services at UVA and others to help refugees become productive members of our community."